

before the transformation takes by lucdarling

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Summary:

Steve complains at length that he doesn't need a protector, especially not when he himself was a shield against those awful monstrous creatures from last year. Of course his parents don't know anything about that and so Billy Hargrove, hellhound for hire, enters his life.

1. Sunday

Author's Note:

Hope you all enjoy this. It started with a WIP snippet from saltstuck back in March 2020 and I took it in a different direction. Then it grew. I've been working on this on and off since then and I'm nearly finished. It should be five chapters, maybe six.

Title from "Wolf Like Me" by TV on the Radio though I like the Lera Lynn ft. Shovels & Rope cover slightly more. If you like this prologue, please let me know in the comments!

"I don't need a babysitter!" Steve yells, voice echoing off the walls. He wants to scream he is the babysitter but his parents would give him a look of condescension about such a mundane job. At least they would if they were there, and not delivering the news via flame like they do most everything. Steve is getting a hellhound protector whether he likes it or not.

Steve could clarify and say he's providing tutoring to a level-eleven mage, the first of her kind. That would turn their looks of disgust into ones of awe, and Steve would watch their faces change from pity to greed. He doesn't want that, he gets enough of that and the too-rich chocolate taste on the back of his tongue that accompanies the self-aggrandizing conversations at his father's holiday parties.

"Woof," says the new babysitter, clearly having heard Steve's cry and letting himself into the house at some point while the flames were burning. The coals are cooling ash now and Steve lets the spell drop. His hands curl into fists as he turns around and the power draw of the communication spell is released on his end.

Steve is relieved to find the hound slightly shorter, somehow it makes him feel better about the situation. The second thing Steve notices is the muscles, or maybe the dirty blond curls. No, it's the muscles, thanks to the half open shirt and gleaming pendant. It looks like real silver but it's backwards with the face touching tanned skin.

Pendants, though everyone usually just calls them tokens, are usually worn facing out so everyone can see your patron. It's an easy way to avoid fights, finding allies for a ritual or giving offense. Steve doesn't wear one because he doesn't have a deity or anyone he wants to give himself to that badly. He's barely an adult, there's plenty of time to figure out who he wants to dedicate himself to.

One of his charges, Dustin, has already tied himself to Minerva. No one was surprised at that except maybe Dustin's age but as his mom had given permission, it only raised a few eyebrows amongst the elderly. Robin had tossed the burning sage in the water at the quarry - unfortunately the largest body of water closest to Hawkins - and yelled Sapphos's name in the dead of night just last winter once she reached her magical majority. Steve knows this because he had been waiting in the car, heater running to keep warm; the things you do for your friend even though she now lives an hour away.

"I didn't ask for you to be here," Steve snaps, storming up the stairs to his room. It's childish, but his bedroom is still his refuge, the only real home in this mansion that feels more like a mausoleum.

The hound follows on his footsteps, nearly silent except for heavy exhales.

Steve considers slamming the door in his face, but his parents raised him better. He trails a hand over the dried herbs hanging next to the door frame for a quick recharge and makes a beeline for the unmade bed with a groan. Talking to his parents and holding the fire steady always gives him a headache.

"I didn't ask for you," Steve repeats into his pillow.

"I know, princess." The babysitter's voice is husky and deeper than Steve thought it would be. "But you're not paying for my time, it's your daddy. As long as he holds the contract, I gotta follow his word. Doesn't mean we can't have some fun though, huh?"

Warm fingers touch Steve's arm where it hangs off the bed, circling his wrist. Steve jerks his arm out of the loose grasp and pulls it to his chest.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Billy,” the blond says and sits on the floor, leaning against the bed with a sigh. “Can we make the best of a bad situation? I promise, I won’t be around all the time like you think.”

Steve lifts his head up and meets startlingly bright blue eyes. “You won’t?”

Billy shakes his head, curls swaying. “I probably gotta put in an appearance at home.” His mouth curls on the word, like it’s not the one he wants to use. Steve blinks at the sight and the sudden tightening in his gut.

“Not going tonight,” Billy says and smirks when Steve’s face falls. “But sometimes, unless that was part of the contract. I didn’t actually read it.”

Steve scoffs. “You’re a sellsword, then? I feel so much safer already.”

Billy growls and it’s the first thing he’s done in the past hour that Steve thinks actually gives him away. He doesn’t have a foul odor, like the bestiary claims and his eyes aren’t red. He should probably read the entry again, if Billy is gonna be hanging around.

“Do you have a second form?” Steve asks, before he can think about how rude the question might be.

Billy stretches his arms above his head and Steve definitely doesn’t watch the muscles flex.

“Why, you want me to strip here and now, pretty boy?” Billy leers and Steve throws himself back down on the bed.

“Change, hound.” Steve says archly. “It’d be easier for me, having you take up less room. You’re not sleeping at the end of my bed though, I draw the line.”

“Did your parents not let you have a pet growing up?” Billy asks, muffled as he pulls his shirt over his head. “I might bite.” His hands are at his pants when Steve looks away with a curse, cheeks heating up.

Billy barks a laugh. It makes Steve smile where he's facing the wall, unsure if Billy's shifted or still naked behind him.

Weight on the bed and a wet nose shoved in his armpit makes Steve laugh despite the anger he wants to keep close like an ember in his chest about the entire situation forced on him.

Billy stands over his legs, dark fur and bright blue eyes. "Huh," Steve says and he can't tear his eyes away. His coat looks soft and Steve wants to run his fingers through it. The idea leaves him immediately when Billy exhales and it's literal smoke, sulfurous and awful.

Steve chokes and pushes him away, off the bed. Billy barks for real and it's definitely a laugh despite the fact he's a hellhound.

"Gross, dude. Can't you stop that? You don't smell half bad as a human!"

Billy turns in a circle and lays down on the floor, looking up at Steve like he wants something.

"Walkies? A toy?" Steve shrugs at Billy's growl and knows the grin on his face is a mean one. It's been a while since he used the sharp side of his tongue and just from their short interaction, he knows Billy can take it. "I don't speak dog, but I'm sure we have something to serve as a water bowl somewhere. Might even have an actual dog bed, knowing my mother. Gods know what she's bought over the years."

He pushes himself off the bed and goes downstairs to look. Food isn't a bad idea, anyhow. Steve's headache has faded into something less pounding rave and more like a drum being hit one room over. It's manageable, as always.

Billy follows, claws clicking on the wood floors. Steve actually does pour water into what he thinks might be a soup tureen, heating both of them some leftover pizza.

"Wait, do you have to eat like a dog when you're like that?" Steve wonders aloud. Billy lunges and snaps at the slice. His teeth are sharp and white, coming within an inch of Steve's fingers.

"Hey! Watch it!" Steve shouts, but he laughs anyway. Maybe he did

beg his parents for a pet when he was younger, but that's totally not relevant.

Billy yips and dances around Steve's legs. He eats two more slices and leaves the kitchen while Steve is still working on his fourth piece.

Steve can hear him moving around the house, probably checking on all the dark corners and whatever else a hellhound protector cares about as night falls. He cleans up, pours more water into the soup tureen and heads to bed. He leaves the kitchen light on out of habit.

Billy isn't there by the time Steve falls asleep but when he wakes up in the middle of the night, panting and terrified, bright blue eyes are watching from the desk chair. The room smells like sulfur and cigarette smoke. He can't tell if dog or man is watching, and doesn't bother squinting to figure it out with the light of the moon.

Steve turns over in his bed, flips his pillow to the cool side and thumbs over the bundle of lavender that rests on top of his headboard. It's enough to calm him, better than a joint of Tommy's homegrown herbs. He falls back into sleep easily.

2. Monday

Notes for the Chapter:

I think this is the longest chapter and there's a lot going on! I love sibling relationships and it shows haha. Also Steve has PTSD, I honestly can't imagine he wouldn't after fighting off a demogorgon with no prior warning.

If you enjoyed this, please let me know in the comments.

The sun wakes him, shining bright in his eyes. Steve thinks about pulling the covers over his head and then remembers he promised Dustin he'd take him over to the Byers's house. He gets out of bed and looks around his room.

Nothing has been obviously touched and there's no sign of Billy anywhere.

Steve locks up the house behind him after a quick breakfast and snaps his fingers. Billy comes loping out of the forest, fur windswept and smoking in the cool morning air.

"You're okay, right?" Steve checks. He's never spent time around a shifter. "We've gotta go pick up Dustin, one of the kids I uh," Steve flounders as he tries to describe their relationship. He doesn't think about how strange a one-sided conversation is when Billy is clearly listening.

"I do actually babysit, and help when they need some power." He shrugs, like sharing his power isn't anything special. To Steve, it's not. He's never had much, no deep reservoir like Lucas or Mike to tap into. He doesn't mind giving the kids a boost if they need it, like last year.

Billy barks and bounds over to the car, paw on the handle that he can't open as a dog.

"Is it uh, do you want to change back? I probably have some clothes that fit, or my dad has loads he won't miss at all." He doesn't know what Billy did with his clothes from last night. Billy barks again though so Steve opens the backseat, letting the hellhound sprawl all over leather seats with muddy paws and leave fur everywhere instead.

Steve watches Billy from the rearview mirror, dozing and calm. He wonders what happened in the night, if anything did. Steve hopes it didn't, hopes Billy had a peaceful night like he himself did.

Dustin comes out of his house at a run, waving to his mother at the window when he spies Steve's car come to a stop.

"Steve! You're not going to believe-" he cuts himself off with a squeak that Steve definitely plans to call him out on at a later date when Billy unfolds on the passenger seat. Steve blinks and somehow, he's gotten himself out of the car and between Dustin and Steve still sitting in the driver's seat despite not having opposable thumbs.

Steve unbuckles hurriedly and starts yelling. "He's a friend! Not food! This is Dustin!"

"-you have a hellhound." Dustin says, and his voice is full of awe. "Oh my god." He crouches down so he's on Billy's eye level. "Are you okay to pet? Can I pet you? Wait, sniff my hand first. I promise I'm a friend of Steve's. Sorry, I probably smell like cat to you."

Billy sniffs and exhales, smoke rolling out again to cover Dustin's hand. He circles Dustin, sniffing the grass he stands on and his sneakers. Steve covers his face when Billy stands on his hind legs and knocks the cap off the curly hair.

"Hey, not cool! Respect the hat!" Dustin cries out as Billy barks. His tongue lolls out and Steve swears he's smiling.

"Yeah, this is Henderson." Steve introduces the two as Dustin scrambles to pick up and put his cap back on. "Dustin, Billy the hellhound. My dad thinks I need a protector or something."

"Can you blame him?" Dustin points out dryly, already in the process

of opening the door to the backseat for Billy to clamber into the car. "You get beat up every year. You can barely manage to make a herb bundle without nicking your fingers and Erica Sinclair has more runes memorized than you. She's ten."

"One, I cut my finger twice making those stupid bundles because I was still tired from the party the night before. Two, I don't need a list of all the ways your nerd coven and their sisters are better than me. I get it, I'm the chauffeur," Steve snaps, feeling his heart curl inwards with each item Dustin ticks off his fingers. He starts the car and pulls away from the curb.

"No, no!" Dustin says, realizing what he's done. "You're the best, Steve! It's just, book smarts aren't your thing. Which is fine! There are people smarts and street smarts and I don't know, maybe you just haven't found an area where you shine! That's okay!"

Billy huffs from the backseat. Steve shifts the conversation to the latest game Dustin is playing.

The Byers's house feels warm and comforting to Steve, most of the time. The alternate dimension monster accidentally summoned and burned to death in their living room has faded months ago, but Steve still pauses before he puts a foot on the porch.

Billy's nose is cold against the palm of his hand and urges Steve onward. Dustin has already let himself in, missing the exchange entirely.

"Right," Steve gathers his thoughts. "There's gonna be a lot of kids in there. All of 'em some degree of magic, and they're mine. Play nice, got it?" He bends down to stare into Billy's eyes, realizes they're a lot like dancing flames. Billy breathes on him, cigarette smoke with a hint of cloves. Steve hopes that means he's amused and agreeable since it's so different from last night's sulphur.

Steve rolls his eyes and opens the front door. Billy follows him in and barks. All the kids turn.

Mike looks vaguely ill, but Steve allows that might just be his face. Puberty can be a bitch. Will looks terrified for a split second, and

then smiles. Steve remembers the Byers's family used to have a dog.

Lucas looks intrigued and stands in front of a redheaded girl Steve doesn't recognize. She's staring with wide blue eyes. Steve doesn't know why he's overcome with fear and sadness and figures it's lingering from everything that has happened before, stronger in the living room where it all went down.

Steve shakes his head to dispel the feelings and it gives Billy the chance to dart around him, clamping jaws around the girl's arm.

"Hey hey hey!" Steve shouts, horrified. "Don't you dare bite!" His shouts overlap with the kids screams, everything too loud all at once. Steve's headache threatens to come back. In the middle of it, Billy and the girl stand still with their eyes locked.

"Give us ten minutes," the girl says. She hasn't moved a muscle and looks like she could stand with Billy's jaws around her arm all day. Steve is impressed, if only because he knows that if Billy had done the same to him at their first meeting, he likely would have tried to kick him off or something in the next minute. This random girl definitely has guts.

The kids part when she moves toward the door, Billy in step next to her. Her red hair shines in the early afternoon light like fire and Steve decides to follow. Billy is still his hellhound after all. He pauses to tell the boys there had better be no eavesdropping, then has to jog to catch up when he sees that the girl and Billy are halfway down the road.

The girl draws a circle in the dust around Billy with her foot. She doesn't close it and glares at the dog, crossing her arms.

"I will, if you don't change back. I'll use one, and I won't be sorry." She sounds upset, and Steve realizes he still doesn't know her name.

"Hey, I'm Steve." He holds out a hand, and the girl shakes it, drops it immediately. Billy barks and she scowls at him.

"Max," she says in a curt voice, recrossing her arms. "How long has he been like this?"

“What do you mean?”

“Am I not speaking English?” Max asks and Billy growls. It sounds like a warning and Steve doesn’t know who it’s for. “How long has my brother been shifted? Did you make him change the minute you signed the contract, just for the sight of it?”

Billy barks and nudges Steve back a step. Steve hadn’t even realized Max had gotten so close to him, or that his hands were shaking. He stuffs them in his jacket pockets.

“You’re an asshole,” Max spits and she’s shaking too. Steve wants to reach out, soothe her and then her words register in his brain.

“What? Brother? You don’t look anything alike.” Steve admits. Maybe in the eyes and the clear attitude but Max is thin and almost delicate compared to Billy’s stocky, muscled build.

“Tell him to shift back,” Max demands. Her face is red with anger and Steve wonders if she’ll actually burst into flame.

Steve looks at Billy the hound, who puts a paw over his nose like he’s embarrassed. “You can change back, if you want.”

Max screams, a sound of pure frustration. “Did you not read the contract?” She pulls at her hair and Steve is surprised he doesn’t see any sparks. “Or are you actually just the biggest dick walking around this small town?”

Billy growls again and this time, it’s definitely a warning for her. Max whips her head around and glares at Billy, stomping a foot. Steve really isn’t surprised that when she lifts it, there’s a scorch mark in the shape of her shoe.

“Well, you clearly can’t tell him,” she gestures to Billy’s form, “and excuse me for caring!” She turns to Steve, a shade calmer. “You didn’t read the contract.”

“Uh, no. My dad signed it and told me about it like ten minutes before he showed up at my place.”

“But he shifted when you told him to?” Max presses and Steve shrugs.

"I asked him last night if I could see it, if it was even possible. So he's been a hound the whole time?" Steve looks at his watch and tries to calculate how many hours it's been.

"Yes." Steve is well-versed in the silent admonition of his idiocy from years with Nancy and his failures at what passes for essays.

Max blows out a breath and runs her hands through her red hair again, yanking through a tangle. "Tell him to change back, order him. Asking won't do jack shit." She toes at the circle and closes it.

Billy lolls out his tongue like Max has said something amusing.

Steve coughs and looks at his supposed protector sitting in a circle drawn into the dust. It's clear he could leave at any time, there's no power charging it. It's just a circle in the dust and yet, Billy doesn't leave.

"I order you to be a human again." Steve watches, fascinated, as Billy's hound wavers like a heat shimmer. The air turns hot and he has to step back as it grows, closing his eyes against the burn.

When he opens his eyes again, Billy's standing there with dirty blond curls and all his muscles on display. Steve licks his lips and tells himself it's because of the sudden heat dissipating, leaving them dry.

"Gross, go flirt on your own time." Max interjects and is already throwing a wad of fabric at Billy from a backpack Steve didn't see until now. "You're lucky I knew this would probably happen."

"No, you're just a worry wart." Billy corrects and his voice is a rasp, like he's smoked a whole pack in an hour. "You had no idea I'd be here."

"I had no idea where you'd be!" Max cries out and scuffs at the circle, breaking it by the barest amount. Billy takes a step forward as soon as it's no longer trapping him, if it ever did, and hugs her close.

"Let it go, kid. Let it out. I can take it." Billy says quietly, and Steve doesn't think he's meant to overhear this. He wishes he could plug his ears but before he can turn around to give them some privacy, Max wails and her hands burst into flame. Orange-white crawls up her

arms with impressive speed, hair crackling like dry logs and spreading down her body to engulf her.

Steve's jaw drops open. Not only is Max on fire, she's got incredible control for someone who can't be older than 14. Billy stands there, mouth set in a thin line and looking out into the trees. He doesn't look at Steve, even though Steve can't look away from the pair.

Max burns out silently a few minutes later, unwrapping her arms from around Billy's waist. She doesn't seem to notice he's nude or that she's still gently smoking and Steve wonders how often this happens. Billy pushes her back gently and bends down to grab what Max had handed him earlier.

Billy pulls the jeans on with a little jump at the end. They frame his hips perfectly, Steve notices.

"You good?" Billy bends down to look at Max's face, hidden behind her curtain of hair. "Ready to go inside and be sociable, not a miserable little burning pissant?"

"Fuck off," Max says and gives him the middle finger with a smirk she almost certainly learned from Billy as she heads back toward the Byers's house.

"Kids, man." Billy drawls after a long minute of silence once the door has shut behind her. He's leaning against a tree, one leg bent to rest the flat of his foot on the trunk of the pine. He's still shirtless. Steve unsticks his feet from the ground and scrubs a hand over his face.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"Hellhound, hired to protect you." Billy points at himself, then Steve. "You, a mediocre mage but obviously something is up or your parents wouldn't have bought my services. And you met my step-sister, Maxine. She gets real upset when you call her by her full name so I don't recommend it."

"Okay." Steve nods his head. "And clearly I need to find the contract. You can help me understand it because I gotta tell you, legalese really makes my head hurt."

"I can't," Billy shifts his weight and gives a long slow blink. "Your kid Henderson might be able to parse it out with that patron of his. Don't involve Max, no matter what she tells you. She's already seen too much."

"Right, like you hugging while you're naked." Steve counters. He knows some of the West Coast mages like sky dancing. It's always seemed too far out for him and his Midwestern sensibilities.

"Nah," Billy shrugs. "I just didn't want her to burn another pair of my jeans. She only bothers to 'proof her own clothes."

"So I have to order you?" Steve double checks. "Why didn't you say anything when we met?"

"Like you wouldn't have taken advantage of that right off the bat," Billy points out. "We were both playing up, being jerks."

Steve rolls his shoulders and starts to walk back toward the house. He wonders what happened last night that made Billy into someone slightly more complacent, more serious. "Yeah, I guess so. But now that I know, I promise I won't order you. Not even in a joking manner." He pauses as a thought hits him.

"Does it hurt, the changing?"

Billy claps him on the shoulder and his palm is a brand against Steve's shoulder. "Not anymore, pretty boy." He opens Steve's car door and reaches in for a shirt he must have put there sometime last night. Steve doesn't bother asking how he got in the car in the first place and walks past as Billy buttons the shirt halfway up.

Steve gets the sense there's more to that than what Billy's saying, but lets it go. He's gotten enough secrets and drama from his new protector for a month in the span of a half hour.

The kids don't even look up from their tabletop game when they enter so Max must have told them something. Or maybe they just know Steve's business before he does, as sometimes happens. Steve huffs at the lack of attention and Billy whispers in his ear.

"Feeling a little needy, princess? The show wasn't hot enough for

you?”

Steve coughs, tells himself he isn't blushing, and shoves Billy in the direction of the couch since the kids have taken over the kitchen table. He pours them water, in glasses for both of them this time, and sets them on the coffee table.

Billy looks tired, eyes half lidded and lounging against the arm with one foot on the floor and the other stretched out across the back of the cushions.

“I wanted to sit there,” Steve points out.

“You still can,” Billy smirks. “Plenty of room.” The kids laugh at something in their game, and Steve reminds himself they're not laughing at him. He takes a seat on the edge of the cushion.

“I won't bite, princess.” Billy reminds him in a lazy drawl. “Not unless you ask real nice.”

Steve can feel the heat in his cheeks again and groans. He drinks half the glass in one swallow, hoping it will cool him down.

It does, barely.

Thankfully, Billy seems to get it and doesn't push Steve any further. They sit on the couch, Steve pressed against Billy's outstretched leg when he leans against the couch's back.

“So babysitting, huh?” Billy asks quietly. He doesn't need to be so quiet, Steve can tell with a glance that the kids are wrapped up in their campaign. When they're that into it, they get loud with excitement and remember they're kids, not mini mages who were responsible for saving the world last autumn.

Steve shrugs. “It's worked out well so far, I think. They're all alive despite their best efforts. All those idiots together, they might get an A+ in Alchemy but they can still be pretty dumb sometimes.”

“So it's a good group of kids,” Billy says and oh, Steve gets why he's asking.

“Yeah, they’re pretty great. I promise, Max is safe with them.” Billy cocks his head the slightest bit, like that wasn’t what he was asking but received the answer he wanted all the same. Steve blinks and the focused look is gone, Billy’s usual smirk firmly in place.

They stay on the couch the rest of the night, talking about nothing in particular. They only get up to leave once Nancy appears in the doorway to take home Mike and Lucas.

“Do you want us to take Max home?” Steve asks, when the boys are at the door and pulling jackets on.

Billy shakes his head. “She made her way here, she can get home.”

“She’s like, 14.” Steve hisses, shoving at his shoulder. It doesn’t even phase him or push him off step. “We should take her home.”

“No.” Billy barks and it’s clearly louder than he meant it to be. Everyone turns to look at him and Steve grimaces next to Billy’s suddenly charming smile.

“We’re fine,” Billy waves a hand, drawing his knees up to his chest with both feet on the cushion. “Just having a little disagreement.”

“It’s fine,” Steve echoes, schooling his face into something pleasant. Dustin stares at him and Steve gives him a thumbs up.

“She’s your sister,” Steve says in an undertone.

“And I’m standing right here,” Max chimes in, leaning over Billy’s shoulder with a grin. “You don’t need to take me home, I got here all by myself.”

“How?” Billy asks at the same time as Steve.

“Maybe I flew!” Max says mischievously and Steve laughs. Instead of joining in, Billy turns his head to look at her and raises an eyebrow.

“Fine,” she sulks. “I skated over but Mrs. Henderson is gonna drop me off.”

Billy nods and bumps his head against Max’s. Steve has to admit,

they're cute together in the same way two cats hiss at one another but manage to co-exist in the same yard. The closest sibling he has is Dustin, who likes to wake him at odd hours with questions for his next curiosity voyage that Steve has no hope of answering.

"We'll get going then," Billy decides and hauls Steve closer to the door easily with one hand around his arm. Steve stumbles against the coffee table and nearly falls into Billy. "I'll probably see you later this week."

"We can stay until she leaves, I don't mind." Steve offers but Billy shakes his head.

"No can do, gotta get the princess back to his tower before the sun sets."

Steve complains all the way out the door, but it's mostly for show. Billy only lets go of him once they reach the car and have to separate.

"I didn't mind that," Billy says when they're safely back to the empty Harrington mansion. Billy has already explored near every room in the house and they're waiting on Chinese to be delivered. "You do that often, hang out with a bunch of younger kids?"

"Once a week or so," Steve answers. "I also tutor the one who wasn't there tonight, so I guess you're coming with me tomorrow." The doorbell rings and without a thought, Steve starts heading toward the front door. Billy pulls him back into the kitchen and shoulders past him, plucking the money from Steve's hand.

"Babysitter, remember? Let me do my job." Billy smirks and goes to pay for the food. Steve watches his curls sway as he walks down the hallway and definitely doesn't stare at his ass or thighs in the tight denim.

He turns away and looks out at the pool. A source of misery, the albatross around his neck that will never fly away because his parents value their status symbols and their power has sunk into the ground over the years.

Steve can't wait to get away.

He flinches at what looks like a shadow on the far edge of the pool and goes to the cabinet for plates. He pulls them out and they smack onto the counter with a loud clatter when he sees the shadow moving over the lounge chairs and it has four legs.

There's a dog, or something the size of a dog on the other side of the sliding glass door. Steve tries to remember how to breathe. It's just a dog.

Steve peers closer because the kitchen lights are too bright and it's hard to see. The dog shape moves closer, bumping against the glass. There's a trail of slime when it pulls away and Steve shakes his head.

This can't be happening again.

The dog-thing bumps against the glass and shrieks, face opening in an all-too-familiar mass of elongated petals and sharp teeth. It's smaller this time around and that fact does not make Steve feel better.

Steve presses his hands into his eyes, hard enough to see black spots as soon as the baby demogorgon slides off into the darkness.

Billy thumps into the room at a run, food slung onto the counter and nearly sliding off.

"What the hell was that sound?" Billy asks, frantic. His eyes are so bright, so blue when they stare at Steve's face.

"Out- Outside," Steve stammers, not daring to look over but he can point to where it was. It can't be back. The gate was closed.

"Okay," Billy says and puts a hand on Steve's shoulder. "I'm gonna go check it out. Do you want to come with, or describe what I'm looking for and stay inside?"

"Inside," Steve gasps and he doesn't know why it's all of a sudden hard to breath. "Stay warm, they love the cold. And the dark." He fumbles in the kitchen drawer and thrusts a flashlight at Billy's chest.

"Okay," Billy repeats and squeezes Steve's shoulder. He didn't realize they were still touching and misses the weight immediately when Billy pulls away. "I won't be gone longer than ten minutes, Steve. I

don't need a flashlight.”

He strips in the kitchen quickly without a care, the bright lights washing out his tan. Steve inches closer to the patio door and pulls it open the smallest amount. The hellhound squeezes through and seemingly melts into the shadows.

Steve slams it shut, as much as one can slam a sliding door and backs up against the fridge. He sinks to the ground, one hand over his mouth to keep his scream inside. He stares at the watch on his wrist and counts the minutes as they pass by.

At ten minutes and thirty-four seconds, he can hear a dog bark from the backyard. Steve hurries to stand, dizzy and sweating. He reaches for the door and pauses - what if it's a trick.

He waits, breath held until the bark comes again and he sees small blue flames as the shadow comes closer. Steve pulls open the door and Billy saunters in, shaking himself all over when he's standing on the kitchen tile.

He shifts with a shimmer and wave of heat like before. Steve can't believe it was just this afternoon; it seems like a whole day has passed since they were at the Byers's house.

“I didn't see anything,” Billy starts to explain. Steve manages to shrug because he didn't expect any different. He feels like vomiting.

“They've definitely been there, whatever they are. That sap, slime, whatever it is, it's sticky like fly paper. You can't miss it on the trees and underbrush.” Billy makes a face of disgust and Steve can't help but snort.

“Nothing's out there right now?” Steve checks and Billy shakes his head.

“I don't know where they went, I could hardly see the trail they left even with-” Billy taps his temple like Steve should know something. He really needs to borrow Nancy's bestiary again, and soon. “But now I understand why I'm here.”

Neither of them sleep that night, sitting on the couch in what the

Harringtons call the den but it's too large to be comfortable. Steve drinks nearly an entire pot of coffee on his own and is almost vibrating by the time the sun comes up over the forest.

Billy knows almost everything now - the demogorgons of last year, Barb's drowning, how Steve used to be an asshole and now can't sleep at night, can't sleep without a light on.

They both get some actual sleep once the sun is fully risen.

3. Tuesday

Notes for the Chapter:

Real life happened, and is still ongoing. Have another chapter featuring Billy & El. These words haven't seen a beta, so let me know of any glaring errors, grammatical or otherwise.

Please leave a comment in the box at the end if you liked this!

Steve wakes what feels like hours later, groggy and starving. His watch says he's only managed four and a half hours. That's pretty good for him nowadays.

Billy is curled in a corner of the couch, facing the back cushions.

"I need more coffee," Steve groans, throwing an arm over his face to block the sunshine.

"You've got a kitchen," Billy responds with a grunt, turning onto his back. Steve isn't surprised he sleeps shirtless and tries not to stare.

"Yes, but they don't come with waffles."

"If we're going into town, we're taking my car." Billy sighs and Steve rolls his eyes on his way to the shower.

Billy drives twenty over the speed limit, music blaring something Steve knows enough to categorize as metal, but he can't make out the words over the wail of guitars. They reach the diner in half the time it normally takes Steve and it's a near thing Steve doesn't stumble out of the car.

"You drive like a maniac!" Steve accuses, even as he holds the door open for Billy to proceed into the diner that grabbed all of Benny's business after his death. They do excellent chocolate milkshakes.

Steve takes his usual booth at the window and Billy shakes his head, walks on to the booth in the back. It only hits him when he's facing

Billy, with Billy's back to the wall, what the other man has done. How can anyone be this analytical so early in the morning, on so little sleep?

"So what's good here?" Billy asks, finger dragging down the laminated menu once the waitress has dropped off coffee.

"Nearly everything, except the fried fish."

Billy makes a face. "We're in a landlocked state, Harrington. There's no way I'm gonna order fish, ever."

"Smart choice, California," a voice cuts in and Billy tenses as Chief Hopper slides into the booth next to Steve. He nudges Steve gently with a shoulder in greeting. Steve smiles back and hopes it isn't as strained as he feels. Exhaustion is hitting him like a tidal wave all of a sudden and he drains his coffee in a few swallows.

"Jim Hopper, chief of police." He introduces himself but doesn't stretch out a hand.

"William Hargrove," Billy says evenly. "This idiot's bodyguard until what ever the fuck showed up last night at his place is gotten rid of." His eyebrows furrow. "Or killed, I'm not picky. I just haven't worked out how to accomplish that yet."

The waitress stops by their table, refills their coffee and takes their orders for greasy breakfasts.

Jim turns to Steve when she leaves, who gives a sheepish smile. "I was definitely gonna call you, I swear." He offers the excuse halfheartedly and Jim rolls his eyes.

"What happened?" Jim's tone brooks no argument.

"They're back. One came up to my kitchen window, screamed and ran off." Steve says and watches Jim's face fall. "I thought the gate was closed."

"No trace of where it went," Billy says without a smile. "Left behind some sap or something on a few trees, but there's no trail for me to see."

Jim seems to understand what Billy isn't saying, even if Steve doesn't. "Damn, I was hoping you'd be able to. It was a long shot but worth a try." Jim exhales and picks up his hat as he not so gracefully gets up from the booth. He seems even more tired now, standing in front of the table and something sour turns over in Steve's gut that he had to bring Jim the bad news. "Enjoy your breakfast, I gotta make some calls." He leans down to stare at Steve intently.

"Stick close to him, Harrington. I'm glad your parents listened to me."

"What?" Steve asks, shocked.

Jim shrugs and shuffles his feet. "I'm the chief of police, son. You are exactly the type to run headfirst into danger if someone you think is in trouble. And you don't have the magic to back up that sweet, stupidly loyal heart inside you. I called your parents and told them, not the truth mind you, but enough that it got them worried. I guess they found Billy boy here and the rest's history."

Billy gives a cough and Jim glares at him. Steve huffs and crosses his arms.

"You're good at other things, Harrington. Like being friends with my kid." Jim assures him, and while it doesn't sound false, Steve isn't sure that's what he wants to be known for.

Instead of pushing back, because Jim is practically inching towards the door even as he speaks, Steve agrees. "Yeah, that's our next stop. Tell her we'll be by in an hour or so when we finish eating."

The waitress comes back then with their plates and Jim takes his leave before they've finished unwrapping their silverware. They eat in silence, until Steve is reminded he meant to ask something last night.

"So your eyes," Steve starts and then stops. He doesn't really know where to go from there, or what he even wants to ask.

Billy looks up from his plate, pushing the last of his hash browns around to mop up egg yolk. "They're blue. Yours are brown, or green

depending on the light.”

“No, I mean,” Steve motions towards his own face like Billy had last night.

“I’ll explain on the way to this kid the chief of police has apparently got, which no one mentioned before.” Billy drains his coffee and reaches over for Steve’s mug without asking. He stares at the light brown liquid within, mouth twisting before pushing it back across the table.

“You ruined it with cream,” he mutters, and leaves the booth to pay the bill. Steve doesn’t try to hide his laughter before he finishes his perfectly fine coffee. He’s pretty sure the song loudly screaming out of the speakers of the car minutes later as they pull onto the main road is retaliation.

“You said you’d explain,” Steve reminds him when they’ve pulled off the main road and onto the dirt track to Hopper’s cabin. The Camaro drives slowly through the woods, Billy cursing when a stray tree branch scrapes too close to the paint or across the roof of the car.

“Hellhounds,” Billy starts and then turns Led Zeppelin down. “We’re special, occupying two places.”

“Uh, okay.” Steve says, though he doesn’t understand.

“Hell, Steve.” Billy says with an expression Steve can’t decipher. “We spend most of our time here, on your plane of existence with the magic users and the fae and whatever else. Most of us are employed as guards of some kind, maybe mercenaries if we want to earn a little more coin and like to run.” He grins and it’s distinctly wolfish. Steve suddenly realizes that for all Billy looks his age, he could be far older.

“We’re good at tracking,” Billy explains, voice gentle despite the edge in his tone. “Why? We see sins. They leave a shadow, a trail. The worst ones get brought in with prejudice. But there are plenty of people who decide they need their cheating husband, or too nosy neighbor gone and that’s where hellhounds come in. Not straight down, but to whoever holds the contract.”

Steve listens intently, committing it to memory and putting the idea of borrowing the bestiary from his mind. He's always been better when someone tells him the information, instead of expecting him to read it. He realizes this is the most Billy has said to him and wonders what changed. Steve also realizes he hasn't felt safer, sitting in a confined space with a creature who just said he could drag Steve to hell if someone paid enough.

"Contract!" Steve sits upright in the leather seat as the word shakes something loose in his brain. "I need to read yours. Also we're here, so stop the car."

Billy slows to a stop in the forest clearing and pockets the keys. Steve leads the way, stepping carefully over the tripwire and stroking a hand over two different trees before he finds the one Jim has marked with wards.

Steve grabs for Billy's hand, twining their fingers together before placing their hands on Jim's ward tree.

"Push some magic into it, alongside mine." Steve tells him. "It doesn't take much, and then the wards will recognize you."

Billy looks at him, eyes wide. "You want me to use some of your magic? Just like that?"

"Yes?" Steve raises his eyebrows. "I know I don't have a lot, but it's how I got all the kids out to the cabin over the summer once Jim decided Mike was okay to be around El. Jim and I are the only ones tied into the wards. It won't take much, I promise I won't faint on you." He doesn't add that it's how he knows where the kids are at any given time, but Steve sees that as an investment against future trouble because they're all little shits.

Billy's hand is hot against his, callused and strong. Steve presses their hands to the tree and feels Billy - heat, anger, curiosity all thrumming beneath his skin like live wires. Billy's magic is a heady thing, dark and wild. Steve shudders, feeling a bit of his magic curl away from his center like a wisp of smoke and drift out, wrapping around the wildness like a hug.

Their magic together feels amazing and Steve is left panting for breath when the ward tree sparks, glowing a bright blue. Billy doesn't look to be in much better shape, Steve is pleased to see.

They stumble up to the cabin, bumping into each other every few steps. Steve is giddy, punch-drunk and feels like he could snap his fingers and set anything on fire with just a thought even though he does better with the earth elements. He manages the coded knock and practically falls into the cabin when the door opens. He sits down on the kitchen chair as soon as he spies it. Billy leans against the wall, leaving the door open like he hasn't decided if he'll stay.

"Someone new," El says solemnly and Billy turns his head to take her in. He stands straight as she stares. "Creature."

"No," Steve corrects, leg shaking with too much energy. "We don't call other people creatures. This is Billy. Billy, El."

"She's not wrong," Billy shrugs, and self-deprecating isn't a look he wears well. Steve's giddiness is gone, replaced with resignation and weariness.

"No," Steve repeats, looking between the both of them. "You're not a creature," he turns to meet El's gaze. "just like you're not a monster. We don't use those words in this house."

El nods and Steve can feel Billy's gaze on him. He ignores him for the moment. "C'mon kid, what are we learning today?"

"Who the fuck is calling a little girl a monster?" Billy breaks in as Steve gets settled on the couch with some learning-to-read books about herbs and their properties, El tucked under his arm.

"Language," El says primly and ruins it by cracking a grin. Billy grins back, mischievous. Steve wonders if he might be in trouble, introducing the two.

"Papa," she explains, waving Steve off when he tries to stop her. "Bad papa."

Now Billy's glare is focused on Steve. "You let the chief tell her—"

“Jim is not papa. Papa is gone. Jim is nice.” El interrupts.

“Yeah, Jim seems nice.” Billy agrees with her statement. “So your papa’s gone?”

Steve gives a decisive nod and Billy finally settles down, taking a seat on the other side of El.

The afternoon passes quickly, even though Steve doesn’t do anything more strenuous than cuddle El close, read aloud and help her sound out words. Billy is actually the one to cook dinner, muttering that little girls need vegetables. He manages something that looks a far sight better than the usual tv dinners Steve finds stored in the freezer.

Steve takes El outside after they’ve cleaned up, to the small clearing behind the cabin. Billy follows, head swiveling at every squirrel that chitters or moves in the tree branches above their heads. Steve wants to make a joke but he isn’t feeling thrilled about being out in the forest when the sun sets in an hour.

They spend the first half of the time running through El’s usual routine designed by Jim. Steve doesn’t like playing drill sergeant but agrees with Hopper that building El’s stamina in a physical way, like running, will probably translate well to her power level. Billy watches in silence.

“Just like we practiced,” Steve coaxes when there’s ten minutes left in their time outside. El smiles and thrusts out her hand, fingers splayed. She glares at the trees in front of her, fingers curling into a fist.

Billy’s jaw drops open as the trees shake and explode, splinters flying into the forest away from the three of them. Steve laughs at his dumbfounded expression.

El turns to Steve, wiping the blood away from her nose. “I did it on the first try!” she cheers and he gives her a high-five.

“Great job! Do you feel tired?”

El pauses to think about it and says, “I could do it again, I think.”

Steve is about to tell her to go for it when Billy interrupts. "If you think you can do it, that's enough for me."

"I can do it!" El shouts and Billy shrugs like her voice isn't ringing in his ears like Steve's.

"I'm sure you can, but is it worth it if you need these powers later tonight? You did it once, ride the victory and go back tomorrow to win it again. The trees will still be there."

El frowns. "What's going on?" She looks between the two of them. "All the books today were about protection and now he says I might need power tonight."

Steve sighs and throws up his hands. The words are on the tip of his tongue when El opens her mouth again.

"Tell me." It's not a request, and the order hits Steve hard. He knows she's a child, with more power at her fingertips than anyone could rightfully dream of, and that she doesn't mean to.

It's still frightening, being ordered by a force greater than he'd can fathom. Steve clenches his jaw, trying to claw back some control.

"Something happened last night," Billy says coolly. His eyes are burning flames again, the only sign Steve can see that he's affected by El's voice. "This dog thing came up to Steve's back door, it's got a flower for a face and an unholy shriek. And believe you me, I know unholy."

Billy's words satisfy the tiny mage and the control over Steve breaks like a cresting wave. He gasps and curls over his stomach. He's so worried suddenly, almost as bad as the awful night when Nancy couldn't find Barb.

Billy gets an arm under Steve and El rushes to his other side. "What's wrong?" She's a child again, and Steve can't bear to break her heart.

"He'll be fine," Billy steps in again when all Steve can manage is a weak gasp. He feels like he went two rounds with a ghoul, arguably the worst part of their magical defense education.

“You’re gonna go inside, lock the door behind you. You will wait for Chief Hopper to come home, and you will not go looking for anything that goes bump in the night. Do you understand?” There’s a level of seriousness in Billy’s voice that makes El straighten up. Steve can’t look because he’s busy trying not to trip over tree roots as they make their way back to the cabin, but he wonders if Billy’s eyes are shifted into flames again.

El is quiet as they make their way through the forest, and hugs Steve tightly on the cabin’s porch.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes standing in the doorway. She’s tearful, but not crying and Steve is grateful. His own are clogging his throat.

“Don’t worry about it, El. These things happen.” He manages to say and elbows Billy when the other man opens his mouth. “I’ll see you next week, I promise. Wild dogs couldn’t keep me away.”

Billy really does growl that time and Steve winks at the girl. She giggles and slams the door shut behind her. The locks slide shut as she waves through the window, wiping blood from her nose.

Steve smiles at her face, wide and bright. The expression drops as soon as he turns away and Billy has to help him down the steps before he falls down them.

They sit in silence in the car on the way back, Billy navigating the forest road with narrowed eyes. There’s no music playing and Steve takes it as a sign, he just doesn’t know what it means. There’s a tension between them, almost palpable; Steve can almost see it building up every time Billy flexes his knuckles around the steering wheel.

“What is she?” Billy asks quietly, car speeding down the road back to Loch Nora. “I thought she was a kid, maybe home schooled or something. That,” his voice rises to a shout as he jerks his hand back the way they came. “That was nothing I have seen before and I have seen a lot of shit!”

“I can’t tell you,” Steve says and hopes Billy won’t press the issue. “Not homeschooled. Wasn’t a home.” He manages to get that much

out before the government induced geas rears its head and Steve chokes on air.

“I’d ask if you can’t or wont, but I know what a geas looks like, pretty boy. Don’t hurt yourself on my account.” Steve gives him a thumbs up with the hand that isn’t massaging his throat.

Billy hums thoughtfully. “Don’t answer me, stare out the window if you have to.” Steve takes the advice and reaches over to turn the music on just in case it helps. “These monster bitches you explained about, gods, only this morning and that girl are linked. You can talk about them just fine, probably because no one would believe you. She has more power than anyone should have, and no idea how to control it. We all know monsters love power, so they’re probably coming for her. That doesn’t explain why they’re coming for you, though.” He swings the Camaro into Steve’s driveway and cuts the engine.

Steve grasps his arm before Billy can get out of the car. He can’t verbally acknowledge what Billy’s said, but he squeezes his arm and gives a small smile.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Billy rolls his eyes. “The government is a bunch of dumb fucks. There’s always loopholes, you just have to find them.”

They make dinner together, something quick out of a box found in the pantry and Billy grills him for more information. He groans out loud when he realizes Max is probably up to her eyeballs now, just by dint of hanging out with Steve’s kids and covers his face with a hand.

“That’s fantastic. Absolutely great.” Billy shakes his head like he’s ridding himself of a terrible thought and turns back to Steve.

“So these things only come out at night?” Steve looks to the back yard, the eerie glow of the pool lights and shrugs.

“So far,” Steve answers with a shrug.

“Do you think they’ll come back tonight?” Billy rolls his neck after he asks the question, like he’s gearing up for a fight.

Steve can only shrug again. "I don't know. They only go after her, really. The rest of us were just collateral."

"But you burnt one at the Byers's house," Billy presses. "So they know you exist."

Whatever he's going to say next is cut off by the harsh ringing of the phone in the hallway. Steve runs to get it, even as Billy's words echo in his head.

"Harrington," he answers automatically.

"Meeting at the cabin around noon tomorrow," Hopper's gruff tone comes down the wires. "Stay alert tonight, both of you." He hangs up before Steve can do more than agree.

"Perimeter check," Billy says. "I'll run it every other hour." He strips off his shirt, tossing it on the couch.

Steve can only watch him go. He doesn't dare set foot outside, not while the moon's out. Not while the nail bat is upstairs in his closet, Steve remembers.

Yeah, of course they could come in the house - look at the Byers's, for instance - but Steve knows that was a special case due to Will and the power of place. Steve knows this house is supposed to be his home, but it's not. Not really. He's the caretaker for kitsch and ley lines and the Harrington family seat.

There's no reason for the demogorgon to get him here.

He goes to get the bat anyway. It's wrapped in magic, Nancy's fierceness and Jonathan's protectiveness blending with Steve's own wicked swing and muscles.

Billy's back in the kitchen by the time Steve comes downstairs, to his surprise. Apparently perimeter checks on four feet go faster and he wonders again what Billy did that entire first night. Steve is just thankful the guy's in boxers and reminds himself not to stare.

"What is that?" Billy's hand comes up to rub at his nose as Steve enters the room with it over his shoulder. It's a comforting weight.

“Protection, hands-on.” Steve says. “We made it last year. Or really, Nancy and Jonathan did and somehow I ended up taking it home. Wasn’t sleeping well, after everything.”

“Uh-huh,” Billy says with a scrunched up face Steve really doesn’t want to call cute. He lowers the bat to the floor, twists the handle against the palm of his hand.

“You ever tried to lie to Nancy? She can smell lies, I swear. It doesn’t go well. She figured out what was going on before I even did, which is good because no matter how many symbols I hung, I just couldn’t sleep. It sucked.” Steve frowns in remembrance. He’d been half-drunk in his exhaustion, before Jonathan had shown up with the bat and Nancy a step behind him ready with an explanation and a hug.

“So I got to keep the bat. It stays under my bed. Kinda surprised you didn’t sniff it out when you, y’know, that first night.” Steve makes a motion to indicate Billy’s changing form.

“I didn’t spend a lot of time in your room,” Billy shrugs. “I could tell right off the bat-” they both snort at the unintentional pun. “-you were well protected. I figured that of course a mage would protect where he sleeps, it’s just dumb otherwise.”

“Is it going to bother you? I can like, put it in another room.” Steve offers hesitantly.

“I’ll be fine,” Billy says. “So what, we’re just gonna wait around until maybe this monster shows? Maybe it won’t.”

“I could call it,” Steve blurts without thinking.

“Now why would we do a boneheaded thing like that?” Billy asks but there’s something in his voice, a tone Steve thinks might be glee or eagerness. He doesn’t think it’ll last when Billy gets a good look at the creature.

“They like blood,” Steve says, even as he moves across the kitchen for the ritual knives. “That’s what Nancy told me last year, how they got it to the Byers’ place.”

Billy shrugs, one finger spinning the bat so he can look at Jonathan’s

carvings.

“We’d get this over with sooner, if it even works.”

“It’s going to work.” Steve answers grimly. He has a feeling in his gut, the same one that made him run back to the flashing lights and the shouting last fall. He walks out of the room, thinking about where the best place to call a seven-foot interdimensional monster would be. Downstairs and somewhere where Steve has enough space to swing the bat with full effectiveness, where Billy’s powerful jaws can lock on to grey muscled appendages.

He slashes at the palm of his left hand once he gets to the family room, hissing even though he expected the pain left in its wake. Billy’s stripped again, sulfur stench in Steve’s nostrils before the hellhound noses at the cut carefully.

Red blood drips onto the carpet, the knife dropped at Steve’s feet.

There’s a stretching, a tearing at the wall to the right of the fireplace. Steve grips the bat tighter, bleeding into the runes of protectiveness and true aim. Billy growls as the demogorgon steps through into their world.

Steve swings before it’s even fully corporeal. He tugs hard, the nails sticking with a wet sound when he pulls back the bat. Billy lunges, biting at a leg. Biting through, Steve’s mind amends quickly when the hellhound jumps back to avoid a kick and spits out flesh.

It’s not to last, the demogorgon slowly healing the appendage almost to full health as Steve watches in dumbfounded amazement.

The lights suddenly flicker in the kitchen to their right and from the lamp behind them. Steve extends a hand, summons a ball of what everyone calls witch lightning. He keeps it the size of a grapefruit and it’s the work of a thought to cast it above all. There, watch the demogorgon try to draw power from that. Steve would like to see it try.

“That’s not fair,” he complains loudly even as the bat connects again with a wet sound. The demogorgon screams, shrill. It sounds like it’s

in pain and Steve grins.

He readies himself for another strike and pulls it at the last second.

Billy has taken a huge jump, from the floor to the couch and onto the demogorgon. His paws scrabble for purchase as his teeth tear into one of the toothed petals. Nails rake down the grey skin as he falls down and off, skittering away before the demogorgon can connect.

Steve swings again, right at the damaged petal.

Billy goes for the leg he already gnawed on, teeth and eyes shining in the flickering lights.

The demogorgon shrieks again as Billy captures the toothy flesh at the last second with a lunge, pulling as he sinks to the ground to tear it away.

Blood pours onto the floor and Steve swings the bat until his arms should ache. Amputation apparently is too much for the monster. Adrenaline pumps through him and he feels fine. The demogorgon falls to one knee, arms outstretched to swipe fruitlessly at the two of them as they both easily dance out of range.

“Giving up so soon?” Steve taunts. Even on one leg, it’s taller than he is. He probably shouldn’t tease a monster that nearly killed them all last year but the words come out of his mouth anyway, hopped up on success and what looks like the end.

Billy rips at one of the hands, yelping when the other one catches him by the scruff of his neck. He flies backward and hits a chair. Steve spares him a glance, hoping it’s not going to be him vs the demogorgon now.

Steve only has a fighting chance with Billy next to him.

He slams the nail bat into the demogorgon’s offending hand, sinking it through flesh to the carpet and whatever lies beneath. He doesn’t try to pull it up again, prays that it will hold.

“Fire!” Steve yells at Billy. “Set it on fire!” It’s not a metal toothed trap like Jonathan had in the hallway but hopefully it will be enough.

Billy growls and leaps forward, smoke curling off of him in grey-black clouds. Steve raises a hand to cover his mouth, wipe at his watering eyes as the smoke grows thicker by the second. Billy howls and the heatwave sends Steve stumbling back to the kitchen tile.

It's worse than whenever Billy had changed back. Steve is certain if he stood any closer, he'd be burned alongside it.

As it is, he'll probably need to replace the carpet and a couch.

The heat dissipates slowly. Steve darts forward, waving a hand for the witchlight to bob in front of him. It doesn't do much, the smoke cloying and thick.

There's nothing there but ash. Steve whoops in celebration, coughing when he inhales.

Then he realizes, there's nothing there. The smoke has lifted, clinging to the ceiling and driven out the open window when Steve makes a gesture.

"You stupid hellhound," he swears in the empty room and picks up the bat. He disperses the witch light with a snap of his fingers, uncaring that it leaves him with moonlight since the demogorgon wrought havoc on the mundane lighting.

"I didn't know you cared so much," Billy's voice answers from behind him. Steve spins so quickly he gets dizzy, leans his wounded hand too hard against the wood handle for balance. He winces as Billy crosses the room in large steps.

"You okay? Did it get you?"

"No," Steve says and takes a seat even while his hand throbs. "Just my hand, from earlier. How about you? You took a pretty hard hit into uh," he looks down, realizes he's sitting in the chair Billy slammed into. "This chair, actually."

Billy takes a seat in the chair opposite, uncaring that he's nude. Steve hadn't noticed until now and tears his eyes from drifting lower than dusky pink nipples and tanned stomach. "Just my ribs, they'll be bruised for a few days. That thing was foul, man. I've had better

roadkill.”

Steve gives the hellhound a horrified look and Billy cracks up laughing even though he has to hold his ribs.

“I’m kidding, Steve.”

Steve isn’t sure he believes him, but lets it go. “So what happened to the demogorgon? It’s gone, really gone?”

“Really gone,” Billy promises with flames dancing in the eyes of his otherwise human appearance.

Steve lets himself relax and thumps his head against the back of the cushion. “Great. Hopefully that will be the last of the problems and tomorrow’s meeting will just be really boring. We’ll have to tell them you dragged it down or whatever you did.”

“Hellhound, just part of the service.” Billy grins, white and sharp.

Steve’s hand throbs again when he brushes it against the chair’s arm. “Ouch!”

“Yeah, let’s get that cleaned up and catch some shut eye.” Billy’s tone doesn’t give Steve a chance to refute, nor does the warm hand on his arm as he pulls him upright.

Steve lets himself be towed to the bathroom. He watches in silence as Billy bows his head over the wound, cleaning it carefully with running water and herbs. He wraps a bandage over Steve’s palm, bending his head to seal it with a brush of lips.

“Oh,” Steve says softly. Billy’s curls shake when he lifts his head suddenly. His cheeks are light pink.

“Sorry, didn’t realize.” Billy’s skin flushes darker in embarrassment. “It’s what my mom did when I was a pup.”

Steve smiles, puts a hand on one of those dark pink cheeks before he can second guess his own actions. “It’s fine. More than fine.” Billy leans into his hand long enough for Steve to watch those long lashes brush against his cheek in a blink, then he’s standing up.

“We should get some sleep, busy day tomorrow.” Billy doesn’t look at Steve as he leaves the room and as Steve gets to his own feet he can hear the click of dog nails on the stairs.

He runs through his nighttime routine, tries not to think about how early it actually is and falls asleep sooner than he expects, between one breath and the next.

He wakes in the middle of the night, panic swelling his throat shut. Steve’s hands flutter at the covers, for the herbs above his headboard. Fingertips brush over the bundle as the smell of sweet tobacco wafts over him and blends with the calming herbs.

“You’re fine, safe as houses,” Billy’s voice is a low rumble next to him.

Steve’s breathing slows to something steadier as Billy reminds him that he’s okay, the monster has been defeated and of course, nothing is going to win in a fight against a hellhound. He drifts back to sleep on a chuckle.